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What's The Lure?

By Amos Perlmutter

WASHINGTON — The more one learns about the Walker family, the more one is mystified by this network of seamen — John, his son Michael, his brother Arthur and his longtime friend Jerry A. Whitworth — charged with selling military secrets to Moscow. The crucial question is: Why? What motivates people to live such dangerous lives, to risk life imprisonment and betray their country?

Surely, in today's world — and in the Walker case, in particular — it is unlikely that ideology plays much of a role in pushing Americans to spy for the Soviet Union. Virtually no one in the 1980's seriously admires the Soviet political system. The Walkers and their partners were neither idealists nor true believers. And even if they were, as would-be revolutionaries, surely they would be more drawn to third world causes like that of Fidel Castro or the Palestine Liberation Organization than to the rigid, monolithic Soviet system.

Money would seem to be the obvious motive. To people like the Walkers, spying undoubtedly has much the same appeal as big-time gambling — the hope of instant affluence without years of toil. But money, in and of itself, would not be enough to explain the espionage of a man like John A. Walker Jr., the alleged mastermind of the group, who professes to be dedicated to the conservative principles of Ronald Reagan's America. Much more likely, I would hazard, he was

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drawn to the romantic image of the superspy: He may have desperately needed the drama and secrecy, and even the sinister life — just as some people need respectability and others are drawn, often uncontrollably, to unusual sexual practices.

Spying is, after all, a form of theater. To become a spy is to take on a role — often a role that would be impossible under normal circumstances. In real life, John Walker was an obscure seaman, without accomplishments or distinction. When he became a spy, he became someone else and began to lead an altogether different life — in his mind at least, a glamorous and dramatic one.

The danger for all spies, but especially those who crave a spectacular double life, is that they come to believe in the roles they are playing — and they tend to lose sight of their own self-interest. Consider the case of Elie Cohen, another of the countless modern spies motivated by glory and excitement.

Elie Cohen's life changed forever in 1956, when the Israelis invaded Port Said, in northern Egypt, and freed him along with hundreds of other Egyptian Jews. The invasion inflamed his patriotism and led him to ask the Israelis to make him a spy. After some hectoring on his part, the Mossad gave in and trained him in Syrian Arabic and the manners of the Damascus upper-class — trained him, in effect, to become a Syrian.

After two years, he was sent to Buenos Aires to assume his role as the scion of a displaced Syrian land-owning family. He ingratiated himself into the large Arab community there and — once his "credentials" were intact — emigrated to Syria. In Damascus, he set himself up in a plush apartment across the street from the Syrian high command and began hobnobbing with the young Baath officers. Among his friends was Col. Amin al-Hafiz, soon to become dictator of Syria.

Firmly entrenched, with friends in high places, Elie Cohen proved inval-

uable to the Israelis. Among other things, he sent the Mossad detailed descriptions and photos of the Golan Heights — information of critical importance during the Six-Day War. But before long, he seemed to lose track of who he really was. In the mid-1960's, the Mossad became suspicious and warned him to stop communications. But he could not — could not give up his role — and was eventually caught by the Syrians. Shortly thereafter, he was hanged — an obscure Egyptian Jew playing out a double life as an Israeli spy and Syrian playboy. He ended up believing in both roles, and it proved his undoing.

What about John Walker? How else to explain the contradiction between belonging to the Ku Klux Klan and the charges of trafficking with Moscow? How else to explain his inept detective business or to reconcile his patriotism with his alleged betrayal of his country? Like other super spies before him, perhaps he simply needed the excitement of the role. □